

# INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LAW ORGANIZATION

## STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL, JAN BEAGLE

### INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

10 December 2020

Seventy-two years ago today, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As we commemorate that historical milestone on International Human Rights Day 2020, IDLO pays tribute to justice seekers and rights defenders around the world who are working tirelessly in pursuit of human rights, the rule of law, human dignity and the health and well-being of us all.

The theme of this year's commemoration – *Recover Better-Stand Up for Human Rights* – brings home the world in which we are living today: the worst global crisis that most of us have ever seen. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause enormous human suffering, overtaxing health systems and overwhelming front line health and social service workers in even the richest of countries, worsening already dramatic inequalities among people in every region of the world.

Human rights and the rule of law – a human rights-based approach and people-centred justice – must be at the centre of the response and recovery.

In launching his Call to Action for Human Rights earlier this year, the United Nations Secretary-General made clear that human rights must serve as a beacon to guide the COVID-19 response and recovery.

As the Secretary-General has said: “*The best response is one that responds proportionately to immediate threats while protecting human rights and the rule of law.*”<sup>1</sup>

The rule of law requires that legal procedures, institutions and norms are fair and consistent with human rights. But ultimately, it provides a concrete path to justice, equality and dignity for all. In the absence of a strong culture of the rule of law, the gap between human rights aspirations and realities cannot be bridged.

The rule of law is also an essential enabler in achieving peace and sustainable development. It is key to tackling virtually all of our contemporary challenges: for example, climate justice, conflict and inequalities, and the lack of trust that has left the world so vulnerable to shocks like COVID-19.

For this reason, IDLO believes that good governance and the rule of law is central to managing and recovering from COVID-19 in all countries.

The rule of law is a concrete enabler of the response to COVID-19 in at least three important ways: *First*, an effective legal framework – including public health and related laws allowing carefully tailored emergency measures that protect people from infection and disease, while respecting their civil, political, economic and social rights.

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<sup>1</sup> *We are all in this Together: Human Rights and Covid-19 Response and Recovery*, Apr 23, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>

*Second*, the rule of law can be a lifeline for society's most vulnerable in times of crisis. When freedom of movement is restricted and resources are scarce, feelings of stress, anxiety and alienation can exacerbate exclusion, discrimination and social fissures and have a disproportionate impact on people living in extreme poverty, women and girls, the elderly, children, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees and displaced persons, prisoners, and those living in situations of conflict and insecurity.

*Third*, rule of law provides concrete pathways for post-emergency recovery, for example underpinning the realisation of the human right to the highest attainable standard of health and the right of everyone to benefit from scientific progress, among others.

As this exceptionally challenging year comes to a close and as we look towards 2021, the peoples of the world have cause for optimism.

Despite the grave challenges and setbacks of recent years and the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, people are working to *Recover Better*.

Champions of human rights and the rule of law continue to work at all levels – local, national, regional and international – to put human rights and equality at the core of our work. The Secretary-General's Call to Action, the leadership of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Union's recently adopted Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2021-24, along with the human rights initiatives of the African Union, and the crucial work of lawyers, judges and human rights defenders in countries and communities throughout the world, are all important and inspiring examples.

Scientists and medical experts across the globe have engaged in efforts – unprecedented in scale and speed – to invent safe and effective vaccines, to discover therapeutics that work against the virus, and to develop better diagnostics in the response to COVID-19.

In working to ensure equitable access to these life-saving technologies to all the peoples of the world, IDLO joins its partners in the international community in calling for the renewal of our commitments to a human rights-based approach, people-centred justice, and to the rule of law.

*The International Development Law Organization (IDLO) enables governments and empowers people to reform laws and strengthen institutions to promote peace, justice, sustainable development and economic opportunity.*